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TRANSLATIONS:
ANCIENT AND
MODERN
BY
MAURICE
BARING

LONDON,
MARTIN SECKER

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TRANSLATIONS :
ANCIENT AND MODERN

UNIFORM WITH THIS :

POEMS : 1914-1917 (*Third Impression*)

LONDON : MARTIN SECKER (LTD.) 1918

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ANCIENT AND
MODERN
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LONDON
MARTIN SECKER

1115

PRINTED IN ENGLAND BY
THE WESTMINSTER PRESS &
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LONDON

TO what can I liken thy beauty, Agesichora?
To the rainbow imprisoned in a glass bowl or
to the dewdrops on the blossom of the fruit
tree? Shining and delicate thou art, yes, but
thou art even more. When men see thee ap-
proach, there is a silence, as though a spirit
had arisen from the nether world, or Artemis
herself proceeded from her secret abode.

II

PROSERPINE, the month is propitious, and to-night the moon is full ; come, therefore, and bring to me, thy suppliant, an apple from thy orchard or a pomegranate from thy garden, and I, in return, will give thee wind-flowers and violets, and lilies of the valley, and haply a rose ; flowers which grow not by Lethe, flowers which thou no longer seest, but fragrance of them thou hast not forgotten.

III

IN the dawn and springtide of my years,
when my lover was far away, fighting an alien
foe, Persephone sent for me, Corinna ; but from
the land of shadows I stretched out my hands,
and my beloved left the fighting and the
sunshine, and hastened hither to the twilight
and to me.

IV

KNEE-DEEP in the blue-green water the fisherman stands spearing the silver fish with his sharp trident. The bees are humming in the thyme. The meadows are bright with spring flowers. Thanks to Poseidon, I stand once more upon the shore of Hellas.

V

RICHES I crave not, neither power, nor fame, nor even love, having tasted the sweetness and the bitterness thereof, but a farm where trees give shade in the summer and provide logs for the winter, enough for a blazing hearth.

VI

HER head is small like a half-opened rosebud, her skin soft as blossom, and her movements graceful as of a fawn ; and as if all this were not enough, the Gods have given her dark eyes lit with gold, that look at a man sideways, and steal away the heart of him.

VII

GO not into the woods, go not into the woods,
Chrysis, lest the hounds of Artemis tear thee
to pieces, jealous for their mistress, because one
more fair than she has come to their secret
abode.

VIII

THE city is white in the moonlight, and beneath the olive-trees the young corn is thick with glistening fireflies.

Somewhere, in a street or a garden, a man is singing his heart out for love, for very love. And his hoarse voice rises and trembles, wafting his fierce desire to the unheeding stars.

IX

IN a silent lake thick with tangled reeds and floating waterlilies, a mossy tower and a ruined wall stand covered with leaves. Here, they say, dwells an immortal spirit banished by the Immortal Gods whom she slighted. But she, in her exile, regrets nothing, not even the air of Olympus, so beautiful is her dwelling-place of water and lilies and leaves.

TO the music of pipes and strings, the minstrel sings love happy and unhappy, the beauty of the world the joy of life, the sharpness of death ; and the youths and the maidens listen and weep tears of youth, happy tears ; for as yet they know nothing of love, bitter and sweet, nor of life, nor of death, save the soft words of the poet, and the music which draw from them happy tears.

XI

THE bats are wheeling in the twilight, and a breeze has stirred the air. The women are walking back from the fields. They carry sheaves on their heads and on their shoulders the tools of their craft. They are singing a song of thanksgiving for labour accomplished. For the harvest is over, and the long day is done, and after the toil and the heat, the evening comes and the night.

WITH a tinkling of bells the cattle are coming home. In the village street the herd has raised a cloud of dust, and the sunset gilds it with glory, and no sacrificial procession in honour of Phœbus Apollo himself, was ever more glorious than these cows walking in a golden dust.

XIII

THE budding beech tree is pink and feathery and the cuckoo is calling. The undergrowth is bright green, and the magnolia is half unfolded, and you cannot tell whether that far-away rumbling is thunder or the noise of the guns.

XIV

COUNTLESS flies are buzzing in the stifling tent. Over and over again I con the columns of figures and check the tangled entries about waggons, horses, mules, forage, corn, oats, and harness. And far away somewhere men are killing and being killed, and wounded men are dying and calling out in vain for water.

IN front of the cool colonnade there is a little lake where the broad-winged ducks swim. The veteran watches them and throws them bread. In the thicket a nightingale is singing.

The veteran awaits the news of the battle which he planned carefully, and which even now, and not far away, is being lost and won. The fate of the city, his fate and the fate of all that he holds dear depend on the issue ; in the meanwhile he feeds the birds, and watches the gold fish that gleam in the water.

XVI

BETWEEN our trenches and the enemy his body lies. We cannot rescue it, but neither can the enemy molest it. He sleeps undisturbed by the spears that hurtle over him, and well content, for he fell in the accomplishment of the task in which he more than all others excelled, and in the last of his many perilous hours it was joy he found and not fear.

XVII

STRICKEN mortally by the foe, you had but time to smile, then you fell and lay glorious and beautiful in death.

And you the mother, and you the father, and you the wife of so peerless a man, bewail the loss, but bewail not his fate ; for in order that our inheritance may endure, and that our land may be inviolate, we give the best that we have, and give gladly.

XVIII

JUST as in the Spring a kingfisher darts across the river, and then disappears into the trees, so didst thou come, and, even as the sun lit up thy shining plumage, so didst thou vanish. Too soon, alas ! but in the island dedicated to the sun where thou sleepest, thou hast found a golden nest.

XIX

I MIDDLE-AGED and timid, was employed in the service of the State, sorting letters and despatching them. Yet when the trumpet sounded, they gave me a sword and a shield and sent me to fight the barbarians. After marching for days and nights without rest or food, and having been twice wounded, I was at last left to perish by the way. Now I am lying on the straw in an alien barn, and one of these barbarians, whom I was sent to fight, is giving me water from a cup, and speaking to me in my own tongue of the city I loved, the little city by the river which I shall see no more.

THIS month, a year ago, when the trees were breaking into blossom, you greeted the halcyon, the sea-blue bird of spring, and you sang the joy of battle ; but now, having done with all these things, you slumber under the still grass. This year you will not hear the birds sing, nor see the fields change, and the trees put on their summer apparel.

Your horse is ridden by another, and the hound that you loved has found a new master. But I who had known you for so many years, have found no new friend to place in your stead, nor have I met another like you ; so that now, in the spring breeze that is blowing, I miss something that used to be there, and the sunshine to me is less bright than heretofore.

But you perhaps, in new hunting-grounds, are joyous still, and still to those who meet you shine like the sun, or if your new abode be one of shadow, like a star brighter than other stars, yes, brighter than the moon herself.

XXI

THE full moon is shining over the stubble, and by the camp-fires men are singing songs of home ; home which is not far-off, but to them so far, and which some of them will not see again.

THE wasps are buzzing in the sun, but they cannot reach the ripe cherries, which are well guarded on the hot brick wall ; the pear-trees are weighed down with heavy fruit, the borders are ablaze with flowers, and there is a smell of cider in the yard.

The old woman sits alone in the prosperous garden ; her brother, her brother-in-law, her daughter-in-law and her cousin, are all upstairs packing their goods, for the barbarians are not ten miles off, stealing, destroying, pillaging, burning, killing ; and it is time to go—so they say ; but she does not believe them ; a housewife, she thinks, should stay in the house to the end ; nevertheless she has yielded to her timid kinsfolk, despising them in her heart.

Now she is taking a last look at the well-stocked garden, and she laughs to herself, a mirthless laugh.

YOU stood beside the grave where your brother whom you loved so dearly lay, having fallen fighting for his country. You saluted the dead and turned aside to weep, and then you brushed aside your tears and returned to your daily duty which you did well.

Not long afterwards, you too fell gloriously in the foremost of the fight, lamented of all, for there was none whom it was more hard to spare, and none who was needed so sorely.

But you left behind you yet a brother who was also well-beloved, a pattern to others and a guide. Now he too has been taken. He too has met with a swift and honourable death, slain by his country's foe.

And you, noble father of three noble sons, lament not much, for like jewels your children shine in the crown that our country wears ; and their death, to you so cruel, is a part of the heritage that shall make life more precious and death less bitter to those who shall come after us, to their children and to their children's children.

HE came, eager and laden with gifts. But he met with indifference, neglect, and even contempt. Now that he is old, men besiege his doorway, acclaim him in the streets, and bring him garlands of laurel.

But he takes no heed, for his heart is far away with one who died long ago in his youth, and for whose sake he might once have been glad of these things.

THE orchards are in blossom, but soon the white petal shall fall and the red, and nothing shall remain of all this beauty.

Babylon has fallen, and Troy, and Thebes of the hundred gates ; and one day even thou shalt fall, O violet-crowned city, and thou too, eternal Rome.

The colours of Apelles shall fade, and the marbles wrought by Phidias shall fade and crumble, and even the numbers of Homer and the songs of Sappho herself shall be silenced, and heard no more.

Nevertheless new cities shall arise and new shapes of beauty, and song that shall seem to the hearers immortal, until the world itself shall end. And when the world is ended, there shall be new worlds, and these too shall live and die, eternal and punctual even as the blossom in spring.

HIS voice once made the Senate tremble, and swayed the multitude hither and thither ; but now alone, and almost forgotten, in his fair island he pores over ancient parchments.

His sons have been slain, his friends have deserted him, and his disciples have denied him ; and knaves are making base use of his dreams to decoy fools. Soon the seeds sown in his name will bring forth a bitter harvest. This too he knows well. He is old and sick, but Death heeds him not, nor will he set free the proud spirit which the Gods so cruelly mocked.

FISH, fish, fish, fish, fish, little gold fish, who will buy ? ”

“ Who will buy ? ” cries the old man in the market place, as he walks up and down between the bookstalls, and the booths where children buy toys and sugarplums.

“ Who will buy ? ”

No one will buy, no one will buy the little gold fish, for men do not recognise the gifts of Heaven, the magical gifts, when they meet them.

THE woods are silent in the moonlight. There is not a breath in the air, and nothing stirs upon the ground. To-night Winter is dying ; he is already dead, and Spring is telling the news to the slumbering violets.

THROUGH the bare boughs of the hornbeams behind the farm-house, the twilight is green, and the evening star has touched the grey roof with its rays and almost turned it to silver ; almost but not quite ; and in the darkness it glimmers, like the wing of a mysterious bird.

THE sun is setting over the snow-covered field. Higher the glory fades into a blush soft as the petal of a rose. And higher still in the frozen blue something is soaring. As it soars, caught by the sunset, it glistens like a fire-opal. What is it? What is this mysterious messenger? Whence came and whither is going this winged and magical apparition, greater and swifter than any mortal bird?

THE trees are red with rising sap. Against the twilight of March the bare boughs hang like a web. The little clouds which all the afternoon raced with the wind are now being shepherded by the Spirit of the Evening to a far-off harbour, and you who used to outstrip them are quiet also.

.

A GAINST me soaring into the blue, out of the vastness, soft billows of clouds arise from nowhere and vanish like smoke. Far beneath me the coloured world, rich with shadows and brown woods and fields newly green, is spread like a chequered board. And far away, at the end and edge of the world, a grey girdle, a mysterious fringe fades in a circle of mist. Is it the sea ?

DADELIONS and appleblossom and a host of bees ; thunderclouds, thick grass, and the oak-tree at last in leaf, the blackcap building and singing. The lilac is in bloom and the lilies of the valley are unfolding their leaves and their bells. The spring has come and the spring is going, and you who were here last year and saw all these things, this year are far away.

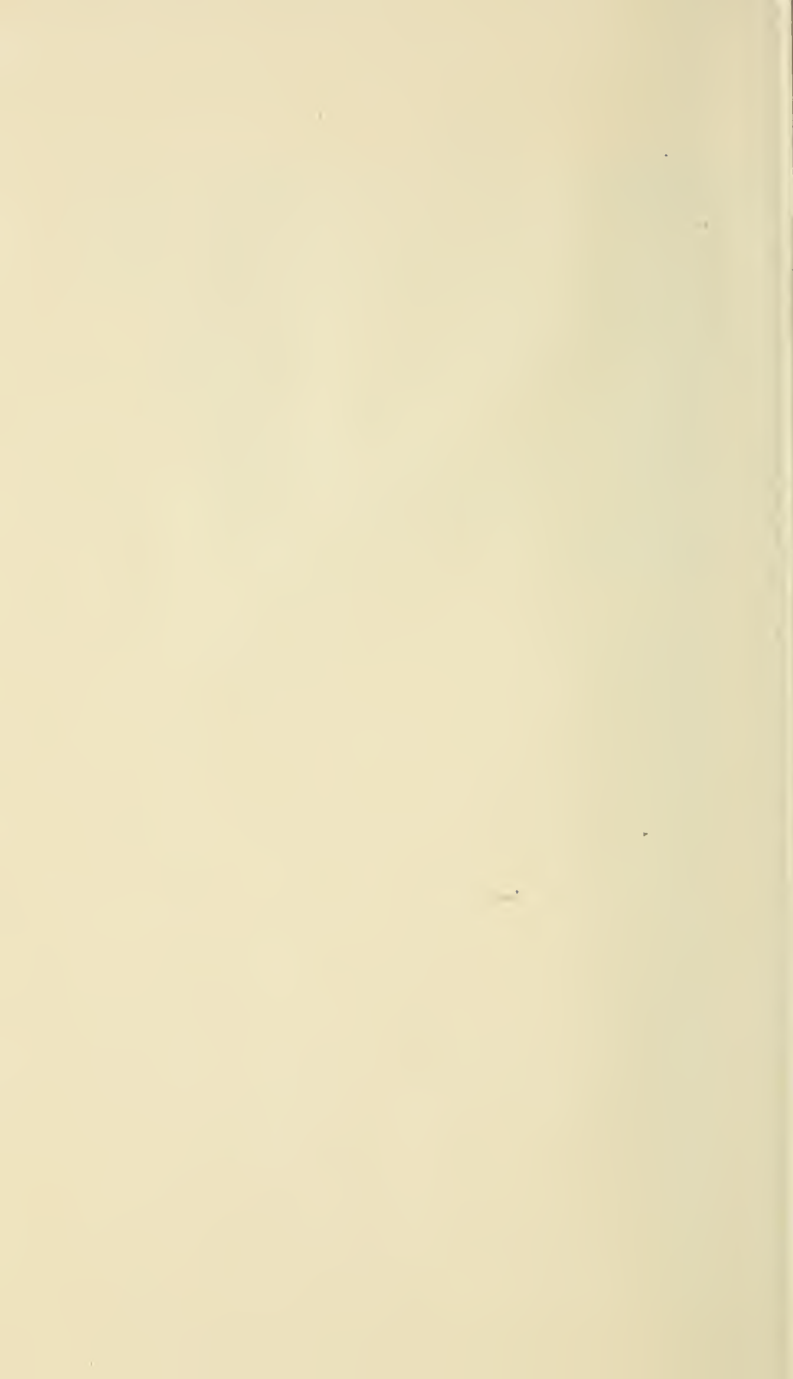
TOWARDS evening the curtain which had shrouded the world was lifted a little in the west over a belt of fire where floated reefs of gold. In the east, a rainbow stretched right over the sky ; tall and round and perfect, dewy with rain and fiery from the sunset. And all the eastern sky ; still grey, smouldered with purple lights ; and the dirty little village was transfigured, and every sordid window-pane and each muddy pool shone like the jewelled bastions of the celestial city.

THE rain had fallen all day long without ceasing ; but in the evening a rainbow stretched right across the eastern sky. In the west, over the dark trees, on the brow of the hill, the sunset turned all the moisture to golden fire. Under the trees, on the burnished field, a white horse ploughed slowly ; but it was too dark to see the ploughman. In the east, against billows of cloud, faintly tinged by the sunset, the cathedral arose above the roofs of the little town, like a bird protecting her nest. The rain pattered on the leaves of the trees along the road ; the guns were booming far away ; a soldier went by whistling, and near the churchyard a woman dressed in black was holding a wreath. It was neither sunset nor sunrise, neither autumn nor spring ; but the dawn (so dark and yet so luminous) of a new season, the presage perhaps of triumph mingled with tears.

BRIEF-FATED among mortals, glorious was thy end, when peerless among the swift and most daring among those athirst for danger, after slaying so many of thy foes, thou at last didst fall, veiled in a cloud, in mortal combat with one second only to thyself.

XXXVII

THREE nights ago we laughed and drank and talked and sang together while the fiddlers played. To-night they are playing the same tune, and we are laughing and drinking and talking and singing, but you are not here. Wherever you may be now, we know that you would have us do the same, and laugh and drink and talk and sing as though you were still with us. This we know well ; so is it now and so shall it always be ; but sometimes . . . it is difficult.



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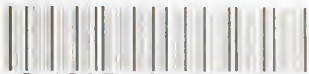
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